



# the core

the **central truths** of the faith

## Discussion Guide

### You are designed for community: Ephesians 4.11-16

#### Getting Started: 10 minutes

o Rate yourself on a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being “I prefer to be completely alone” and 10 being “I have to be connected to people.” Can you elaborate?

o Optional: What from the sermon, if anything, encouraged, challenged, or really made you think?

**Setting the Stage:** *Life as a follower of Jesus begins in connection, not in isolation. That sounds strange in a culture that values individualism. It is downright scary for those that are introverts. Even extroverts, when they really understand what Paul is saying, get a little unnerved. But, in the Kingdom of God, priorities, even those of our native culture and personal preferences are rearranged. There is no such thing as “me and Jesus,” nor is there “me and Jesus and some casual acquaintances,” at least not if we want to grow to experience life as it was meant to be. There is only “me, Jesus, and deep connections with others who follow Jesus.” We need each other. Life as it was meant to be depends on it.*

**Diving Into the Text: 60 minutes** (The following questions are intended to provide your group with a simple road map through the text. Feel free to use these questions in ways that best fit your group and the dynamics of your own meeting.)

- Read Ephesians 4.11-16. (*Leader Note:* You may wish to use the Notes section to provide context.)
- In what ways is the Christian life to be marked by connection? (*Leader Note:* Draw out as many answers as possible.)
- What are the results of Jesus-followers living in connection? The results of living in disconnection?
- Compare Paul’s words about connection among God’s people with ideas about connection from culture. What are the similarities and dissimilarities? (*Leader Note:* Allow plenty of time to think here. Answers may not come quickly as we are so steeped in culture that it can be difficult to view it objectively.)
- Where do you see people living connected in the ways Paul describes? In your mind, what has enabled them to live in this way?
- Evaluate your own life. What level of connection with fellow followers of Jesus is present in your life? Can you elaborate?
- In our own group, how well are we connecting with one another as Paul describes? Can you explain?
- What might be some areas we could work on to foster greater connection? What steps might we be willing to take as a group to work on these areas?

#### Wrapping Up: 20 minutes

o Prayer requests

o Group prayer time

o House-keeping matters (assignments for the next meeting)

## Group Notes

### *You are designed for community: Ephesians 4.11-16*

#### **Context and Background**

**Ephesians:** The book of Ephesians is a letter written by the Apostle Paul to the house church in Ephesus in the first century. Most likely, this letter was an encyclical letter. That is, Paul intended this letter to be shared among all the churches in Asia Minor. The strongest argument supporting this idea is the absence of addressed controversy or conflict in the letter. Most of Paul's letters are situational. They address specific questions and issues within a local context. However, in Ephesians, such questions and issues are missing. Rather, Paul seems to be outlining the general parameters of God's gracious movement to redeem people and unite Jews and Gentiles into a single people, along with the practical implications that this redeeming movement has for daily life. As such, the letter of Ephesians is Paul's most general and 'theological' letter. Some have argued that Paul intended the letter to be used as something of an introduction to the Gospel for churches loosely connected with his Ephesian mission, churches founded by missionaries associated with Paul, but not by Paul himself. Thus, the letter would serve as basic grounding for these churches, setting the parameters for faith and practice in these congregations, much like modern church manuals or articles of faith do for congregations today.

**Theology and Real Life:** For many people today, the Apostle Paul was a theologian *par excellence*. While Paul was a great thinker and writer, his greatest gift was not his theological acumen but his pastoral heart. Paul did not write theology for its own sake but wrote task-theology—thoughts about God and life—to address practical issues in the churches he founded. Without fail, in every letter he wrote, Paul intended his theological address to have real life application. One can see this in the fact that each of Paul's letters concludes with an extended practical section in which Paul takes his thoughts on the Gospel and demonstrates how they have application to real life situations. These practical sections of Paul's letters are called *paraenesis*. In the letter to the Ephesian church, one finds a general introduction to the Gospel, describing what God has done to redeem people. As such, the practical/*paraenetic* section of Paul's letter is perhaps his most general description of what life as a follower of Jesus looks like in real life terms. Interestingly, Paul's description of life as a follower of Jesus begins with a description of how the Church is to work (Ephesians 4.1-16). In Paul's mind, following Jesus and participating in the life of the Church were synonymous. In and through the Church, one finds access to God's grace which shapes and prepares one to live as an individual (Ephesians 4.17-6.9) and to engage in the work of God's Kingdom (Ephesians 6.10-20).

#### **The Text**

**The Church and Maturity (Ephesians 4.11-14):** After completing his description of God's movement to redeem people—the Gospel—(Ephesians 1-3), Paul turns to issues of real life. He urges people to live their lives in keeping with God's action on their behalf (Ephesians. 4.1). Such a life begins in community, as part of the Church (Ephesians 4.1-16). Paul begins his description of the Church by describing how people within the Church are to relate to one another (Ephesians 4.2-6). He then transitions to describe the role of leaders within the Church (Ephesians 4.7-14). Leaders are Christ's gift to the Church (Ephesians 4.11) rather than humanly appointed organizational positions. Christ has given leaders to the Church—apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor/teachers—for the purpose of equipping those within the Church to do works of service (See Ephesians 2.10). Second, these leaders serve to build up the Church, which is none other than Christ's body (See Ephesians 1.22-23). This building up is actually a work of maturing those within the Church in their faith and understanding of Jesus so that they might grow to look like the person of Jesus. In Paul's mind, maturity in one's relationship with Jesus begins in the Church under the direction and encouragement of its leaders. Such maturity is necessary if people are to be grounded in life. Apart from maturity, people will find that they are tossed about in life by teachings contrary to the Gospel (Ephesians 4.14). Paul's primary concern here is most likely ethical, though one cannot separate the theological. That is, Paul is concerned that bad thinking would lead to bad practice. Paul's language is quite descriptive, that of flotsam and jetsam being tossed about by the waves of the sea. He imagines the immature life as subject to external forces leading to unstable and uneven life practices.

**The Church and Community (Ephesians 4.15-16):** One might be tempted to think that maturity in one's relationship with Christ depends solely upon the leaders of the Church. However, this is not the case. Leaders are God's gift, and their primary role is to lead believers to maturity. Yet, in the Church, people are in deep connection with one another (Ephesians 2.11-22; 4.4-6). This connection to one another is also to serve as a force leading one to maturity. This occurs as people within the Church speak truth to one another in love. Truth is a clear statement of the way things really are. Therefore, one might imagine the speaking of truth to be statements about who God truly is and who people truly are, both positively and negatively. In this truth-telling to one another, people find growth toward the character of Jesus. Thus, Paul envisions people in intimate connection with one another spurring one another on to growth. The Church as a whole is held together by Jesus, but it has two main aspects: parts and ligaments. In the context, the ligaments seem to refer to the leaders and the parts seem to refer to everyone else. Growth happens as all parties do their own part, leaders in leading and others in speaking truth to one another.

**Application:** Life as a follower of Jesus begins in connection, not in isolation. That sounds strange in a culture that values individualism. But, in the Kingdom of God, priorities, even those of our native culture are rearranged. There is no such thing as "me and Jesus." There is only "me, Jesus, and others who follow Jesus," or, in other words, the Church. Following Jesus begins in the context of a community of Christ-followers who are intimately connected to one another, following their leaders and speaking truth to one another in love. It is in Christ-centered community and only in this community that true and lasting growth can occur in one's relationship with Jesus, growth that prepares one to live as an individual.